

# NEW CERES NIGHTS



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# THE SHARP SHOOTER

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Amadeus Lebrun found his bull at daybreak, after a more than anxious night. Three times the yard cannies had flown in a barking frenzy from their kennels to the palisade. The second time the house felis knocked Suzanne's precious miniature of Queen Antoinette right off the mantel as well. And the third time, the young steers in the house field rushed, a rumble drowning the cannies' din. Amadeus had cringed in his bed, waiting for the crash at the wall, the bellow of injured cattle, and thud of tumbled stone.

But the steers had not broken loose. When he saw the bull, he almost wished they had.

The bull had his own pen just behind the barn. He was only a yearling, almost ready to go to stud. Amadeus' sieur had paid two years' tithe for the pipe of offworld semen that yielded this solitary son, but the bull had promised to repay it all. Watching him grow, the broad back, the great neck, shoulders and rump to match the straight, heavy bones, the creamy curling winter-proof hair, all so unlike the black, squat, local stock, the word that came most often to Amadeus' mind was: *Magnificent*.

Now he stood at the pen and refused to squeeze his eyes shut against the sight of red-daubed rails fencing the patches of cream hide, gory meat and stripped white bone. Gutted barrel, fallen head. The whole keeled on its side like a broken ship in a lake of red-stained mud.

The yard cannies raced up behind him, took one sniff and burst into another paroxysm. Amadeus did not turn as Suzanne reached the rails.

Like him, she had been raised in the Haute Savoie. Like him, she had worked with cattle all her life. He did not expect her to scream or faint like a lady aristo. But he was not surprised at the hand she laid on his sleeve.

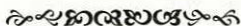
After a moment she said, "You will have to send to Millefleur."

"Yes." He answered under his own breath.

"It will lair now. Maybe for days." The turn in her voice said it all. Fury, grief, blazing contempt. She let her eyes sweep once more across the pen. "It's fed," the fury came uppermost, "well enough."

Amadeus turned to tuck her arm in his own. He had known she would understand. Would share his wrath, his grief, for not merely a priceless, but also splendid, beast destroyed. And his contempt, for a hunter that bypassed prey in the open field for one that could not escape.

"Pierre can take Melusine," he said. He touched his free hand lightly to the fabric of her sleeve. Offworld cotton, smuggled like the semen-pipe, beyond any but an aristo's buying power. A token of thanks from Millefleur, when they had seen the bull calf safely to term. "I'll write a note. The village can signal it on, yes. Millefleur will have to send up help."



Sturdy Melusine carried Pierre down to Haute Savoie's highest telegraph station in half a day. Knowing Lucien St. Vierge better than most vassals ever knew a sieur, Amadeus was reasonably confident the Lebruns would not be blamed. For an aristo, St. Vierge was just. Knowing St. Vierge, he also expected a fast and ferocious response. Probably, he calculated, a troop of Millefleur gamekeepers and maybe a pack of idle young aristos, all sporting smuggled light-guns or rapid-blasters, rattling the mountains with hunting cries and noor target practice, while they ate him out of house

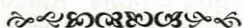


He also calculated that, whatever St. Vierge's outrage, nothing could reach them for six days at the very least. He said an extra rosary each night, and did not remark the disappearance of the young cockerel from among Suzanne's black hens. If she called the loa to keep them safe till help arrived, it was not his affair.

But he was still considerably startled when Louis-Paul came flying round the barn late on the fourth afternoon, skirling, "Papa! Papa! A rider! A rider on the track!"

"A rider?" Amadeus laid down his plane on the trestles by the new rail, turned right round, and stared. "Only one?"

"Only one, only one!" Louis-Paul capered around him. "Quick, papa, come and look!"



The track made a faint but distinguishable double ribbon up the valley's curve, threading spare thickets of the persistent native conifers they called pine and spruce, and at this season passing great patches of native spring flowers. Rashpetal, gold as legendary daffodils, fingersting, delicately purple as mythic violets. The clear, vivid fuchsia of stranglebud, and the tall vermillion spires of touch-me-not. High on either side, native timber furred the valley sides, and behind the farm rose the Savoy peaks, crystal and azure and perilously close, their steep faces threatening imminent avalanche. Mont Isère, Mont Bourbon, and the faceted pyramid of Mont Nouveau Blanc.

Beneath that immensity the solitary rider looked insignificant as any other. But Jean had been right. He was quite alone.

Amadeus swore under his breath. An adventurer, a total stranger, a wandering idiot? Who else, up here, would ride alone?

Nevertheless, a guest was a guest. Suzanne looked out clean sheets, Modestine hurried for more salted meat. Amadeus put his tools away. Washed his face at the pump, safely inside the palisade, found a clean shirt and sat on the front bench to indulge his one luxury: New Ceres tobacco, the only native plant most ordinary folk could tolerate, in a long clay pipe brought all the way from Prosperine.

By the first pinch of the final climb, the mount was clearly a horse. A very good horse, Amadeus estimated, a dark liver-chestnut, at least half thoroughbred, with excellent shoulder and solid bone. Not a wandering idiot, then. An adventurer?



"Pierre," he said quietly into the house-door. "Load my musket. And stand at the window-slit."

Then the track turned to reveal the saddlecloth. The Millefleur blazon of the triple fleur-de-lys.

Suzanne was suddenly beside him, voicing his own thought. "Millefleur sent *this*?"

The horse pricked its ears and tossed its head as the cannies broke into voice. It almost shied, but then came on steadily toward the gate. As would an expected — an official — visitor.

Suzanne's hand brushed Amadeus' shoulder. She whistled sharply to the cannies and took them to be tied up.

Amadeus himself stood up, reluctantly, to unbar the gate.

The horse halted just beyond. Amadeus looked up, the rider looked down. A young face, under a broad-brimmed hat that was new and well-shaped and maybe offworld felt, but not an aristo's tricorne. Clear blue eyes, a smatter of freckles across the nose, hinting youth refuted by the crowsfeet at the eye-corners, the firm jaw. The clothes were plain too, far plainer than the horse. No waistcoat, no buckskin breeches, no calf-high boots. And no sword.

Just an ordinary man's homespun trousers and riding boots, a weather-coat strapped over a pair of saddlebags. And the gun scabbard by the rider's right leg.

Amadeus stared. The lock above the horse's wither was as ornately chased as one of St. Vierge's own hunting pieces, but the barrel was twice the length of a New Ceres musket's, let alone a rapid-blaster. It ended almost at the horse's knee.

No time to gape. The rider was already summing him up in turn. Certainly, with that blazon on his saddlecloth, expecting a salute.

Amadeus touched the quiff of curls that passed for his forelock and mumbled, "Amadeus Lebrun at your service, m'sieu."

The rider bowed briefly over the saddle bow. "Anne-Hilarion," he said. "At your service, m'sieu."

Amadeus knew the aristo habit of giving men women's names, not to mention two names rolled into one. He had offered to hold the stirrup, as a vassal should, before the omission sank in. But it would be as risky as discourteous to insist: *Pardon me, sir, and your second name?*

The rider had already given a quick headshake and swung off unassisted. On the offside of the horse, right hand reaching as by instinct for the stock of the gun.

He came round the horse's head with the weapon at port, as easily as a great dame would wield her parasol, and Amadeus could not take his eyes off it. Not merely the unfamiliar length, but the crescent-shaped butt-plate, the hammer like a rearing dragon that grasped the flint in its jaws, the elegantly slender stock with its acanthus-leaf decoration, a glitter of polished metal and polished wood.

"The Comte de Beligny tells me," Anne-Hilarion's French was offworld, just a little too precise and slow, "that you have a small problem here?"

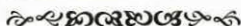
Among his peers Amadeus would have guffawed. Given his will he would have snorted, *Small*? But the habit of ridiculous understatement was also bone-deep aristo. He bowed briefly. *Yes*.

Anne-Hilarion's eyes rose to his. Rose almost six inches, Amadeus judged, and though he looked light and whippy, it was hardly an imposing build. Then the eyes flicked and the gun barrel twitched and Amadeus forgot height and weight together. "M'sieu, that is only my wife! My wife Suzanne!"

She had come to the gate behind him, as the housewife should. He knew the faint scent of hops and yeast and the sound of her skirts. He forced himself not to leap between them with arms outheld.

But Anne-Hilarion had already lowered the gun, and despite plain boots and riding trousers, was making a creditable leg. He did not remove his hat, since his hands were already occupied. His voice was, again, quite courteous. "Madame."

Suzanne curtsyed sweepingly. She had been a house-servant before they married, and knew court manners secondhand. "M'sieu."



Matters grew less formal after they demonstrated the earth closet, the pump, and the tin dish for washing on a stump by the back step, then navigated the guest's saddlebags up to Pierre and Jean's hastily evicted loft, with its single rushlight and sagging string beds. Modestine was quarantined in the kitchen till suppertime. Rubbing down the horse, helping to stow gear and fetch the bull's last Earth-grass hay, Amadeus felt slightly easier. When they shut the barn on the horse and Melusine, he automatically followed when Anne-Hilarion made for the broken pen.

Anne-Hilarion's eyes moved over the rails. The half-dried mud. Out to the barnyard wall, on to the house field where the steers grazed like black boulders amid grey-green native legume and bright green Alpine Earth-grass. Up to the long crystal shoulder of Mont Isère, and back to Amadeus.

He said, "Could you make out tracks?"

The question of a mountain man. A forester, a ranger, perhaps. Amadeus hoped his voice showed no surprise.

"Nothing recognisable. The mud..." He could not bring himself to explain the mud.

Anne-Hilarion gave a little nod. Amadeus felt little doubt that he too was visioning a predator insolent enough to hunt right under the house walls, brave enough to dare double fences, greedy enough to take the stalled beast, the pure offworld meat, first.

The supper bell clanged from the kitchen door.

Pierre and Jean, ruthlessly washed and combed and long since admonished to keep their eyes down, speak only when addressed, never, ever, answer back, had almost managed to untangle their feet, if not their tongues. Modestine was suppressed beside Suzanne at the far table end. And the guest, settling on the backless stool in Pierre's place at Amadeus' right, propped his gun against the table leg.

With the beef ragout before him, Amadeus waited for Anne-Hilarion to pronounce grace, always a *sieur's* or *aristo's* right. But Anne-Hilarion murmured, "M'sieu?"

Head bare, his hair was a light but glossy brown, unpowdered and unclubbed. It shone in the deep glow of the table lamp, and Amadeus found grateful pretext to forestall any opening skirmishes from Modestine.

"Have you been long on New Ceres, m'sieu?"

Anne-Hilarion inclined his head, *aristo* courtesy. "I think almost four months, now, m'sieu. Not all at Millefleur." The faint smile said he knew enough of New Francia to guess why Amadeus could not ask, *As St. Vierge's guest?* "Though I do find it the — most congenial — of the chateaux."

Congenial was not the word Amadeus would have applied to the great house's five floors, double wings and formal gardens — all Earth plants of course — or its magnificent façade, blazoned with the coloured mosaic that had bestowed its name. Nor was it his place to ask, *And how does m'sieu find New Ceres, as a whole?*

"And how long," Anne-Hilarion enquired, "has your family been up here?"



Amadeus slid swiftly through, *M'lord Lucien founded La Vanoise six summers past, I am good with stock, the terraforming is better here, we had Earth grasses already, now four fields carry stock we can eat, like our potatoes and beans. M'lord wanted a breeding farm... Skip the topic of smuggling,* he decided, *mention the bull only as bringing better offworld stock that could survive the plague.*

"The young bull, he had already had it. At ten months. He would have bred, with the stud cows, the sieur had some of the best already picked out. In another three or four months..."

Anne-Hilarion bent his head. After a polite moment or two he asked, "And have your people been long on New Ceres, M'sieu Lebrun?"

The old stories — arrival in the second migrant wave, the family not merely token "people of colour" from mythical N'Orleans but notable cabinet-makers, their taking fealty with Millefleur, then embracing other trades — occupied them until Suzanne asked, "Coffee, m'sieu?"

But as she prepared to bring out her cherished Prosperine coffee dishes, Anne-Hilarion replied, "Charmed, madame. So tell me, m'sieu, what cattle-killers do you know of here?"

The voice was still soft. The slight change of emphasis made Amadeus straighten on his stool. *Not just chitchat*, he thought, with mixed respect and chagrin. *The whippersnapper's been checking my pedigree. Making sure I know what I talk about.*

"M'sieu ... there are said to be many ... strange ... unknown flesh-eaters in the Savoyard."

This time Anne-Hilarion's head-tilt answered, *How many do you know?*

"Here at La Vanoise we have been fortunate. We have never had something like this."

In a moment Anne-Hilarion said softly, "But others have?"

Amadeus stifled his sigh. "M'sieu, there are stories, of course. Many stories of things seen, though most often by those who take a little too much..." He mimed upending his elbow, and Anne-Hilarion nodded. "And tales grow, in mountain winter nights."

Anne-Hilarion's unwavering gaze retorted, *Assuredly. Beyond the tales?*

"Of those I know, Jean-Pierre Cadoux down at Clos-aux-Grives is a sober man. But he lost four, five sheep in a season, once, and he swore it was not cannies. You know, the wild hounds?" The nod answered. "The bites were wrong. The tracks were wrong. Too large."

He took a careful breath. "There are stories of cannies gone back to the wild. And grown." Out of normal size, he let his hand-spread shape. "No-one has seen such, whose word I would trust."

He paused. Anne-Hilarion's steady gaze prodded, *There is more, is there not?*

"Ah, M'sieu, the rest is pure tale. Ice-lopers are supposed to run in winter, down the steepest snow. Breath-takers are invisible. They slip into your house and leave your corpse intact." He let his lip curl. "Persons hear ... noises. Supposedly firedrakes will fly over the fields and singe and soil and kill by night. But..."

Anne-Hilarion permitted himself an ironic, answering half-smile.

Aloud he said, "Do you judge those loose cattle safe?"

It was not aristo custom to treat women as more than ornaments. But Amadeus looked down the table and answered, "My wife is skilled in reading beasts."

Anne-Hilarion sketched a bow and said without hesitation, "Madame Suzanne?"

Suzanne made a seated curtsy's equivalent. "It ate almost all a near-grown bull. Whatever it is, however large, for a flesh-eater, that would last a hand of days."

Anne-Hilarion considered. Now the room was so quiet Amadeus could hear the ticking of coal in the spring fire.

Then Anne-Hilarion said, "This would be the fourth night from the kill?"

When Suzanne nodded, he reached without looking for his gun, and said, "M'sieu Lebrun, I trust Madame's word. But for my own peace, I will watch your stock tonight."



The most emphatic disclaimers and protestations they dared were impotent. Anne-Hilarion merely requested that Jean bring his saddlebag, "For my powder and ball." He thanked Louis-Paul for fetching his weather-coat, nodded as politely to Suzanne's reminders of his long ride that day, and led the way out. He did not, Amadeus noted with exasperation, insist that the women stay inside. But he had scanned the barn-side and asked, "M'sieu, is that your hayloft loading door?" before Pierre became the Lebrun to lose his head.

"*Nom de la Vierge*, M'sieu, you will never hit anything up there!"

The late twilight did not hide Anne-Hilarion's slight, still courteous smile.

"'Tis three hundred, three hundred and fifty metres to the field edge—! The cattle graze right out — the creature will take the nearest if it comes at all, you will never—!"

Amadeus kicked his son ferociously on the ankle and bowed as he stepped in front. "M'sieu, forgive my son, he is too rash, too ignorant. I am sure one sent by the Comte de Beligny will — will—" He himself lacked any polite way to finish, *will know what he is doing.*

Anne-Hilarion actually laughed. A quiet sound, devoid of malice or affront. "M'sieu Lebrun," he said, "your son is correct."

Amadeus and Pierre were both struck mute.

"It is three hundred metres to the field fence. But," he glanced upward, "your moon — Io, is it? — will be up in an hour or less. The sky is clear." He licked a finger and tested the air. "And the wind blows from the mountains, yes?"

Amadeus could only nod. He took the point. The light would be good for most of the night. The door would give height and safety both. For anyone posted there, if a predator approached the field, the wind would mask the ambusher's scent. Nevertheless...

"M'sieu, nevertheless..."

Anne-Hilarion shifted the gun-stock under his arm. "Three hundred metres will not be a problem, m'sieu."

Amadeus felt his jaw sag. He could sense Pierre behind him, ready to erupt. The best diversion he could manage was a weak, "A musket, m'sieu, would never carry—"

"This is not a musket, m'sieu."

Pierre burst out like a snow-freshet, "M'sieu, what *is* that gun?"

Anne-Hilarion glanced back to the steers shifting for the night, clumping to lie in a hollow, or moving to new grass. The flank of Mont Bourbon was outlined in silver radiance. A chill breathed from the mountains and their guest said in his soft, correct French, "M'sieu, I shall be happy to explain this — gun — for you. But not, perhaps, at the moment, do you think?"

Then he headed for the barn door, adding over a shoulder, "M'sieu Lebrun, if you would fasten the door after you let me in?"

Amadeus was past arguing more.



"M'sieu Pierre, you are not completely correct. This is not a gun. It is a rifle. A long rifle, to be precise. Or so they called it on Earth."



"It comes from Earth?"

Breakfast had been slightly early, so their guest need not wait, after his doubtless chill and certainly fruitless vigil topped by a wash at the icy pump. And, Amadeus assumed, a hasty shave, to judge by his immaculate jaw. But Modestine had hardly cleared away after Suzanne's inimitable pancakes when Pierre pounced.

"The type comes from Earth, yes." Their guest lifted his weapon across his lap, his hands on stock and trigger-guard a caress. "This one was my grandmother's." Pierre was speechless. A woman, owning a gun? "A famous marksman. Sharp-shooter, they say, where ... I come from."

Amadeus thanked the Virgin that Pierre had the wit to remember manners, if not to read that pause, and not burst out, *Where do you come from?* It was Modestine who demanded eagerly, "And you, M'sieu? Are you a sharp-shooter too?"

Anne-Hilarion's gravity became a genuine smile. "Ah, mam'zelle, in memory of my esteemed grandparent, I try my poor best."

"And will you shoot it? Will you show us, m'sieu? Now? Today? Oh, please!"

*Never give Modestine a quarter chance*, Amadeus cursed. But Anne-Hilarion turned fresh protests gracefully aside.

"M'sieu, what could be easier? The rifle needs reloading." He did not have to add, *To be sure it fires tonight*. "I would wish to prick out the touchhole. And to true in my eye."

They all trooped back out of the palisade, Amadeus yet again biting his tongue on, *Should the women come too?* But if Suzanne made no sign, he knew better than to try to curb Modestine himself.

He half-expected Anne-Hilarion to prove his boast by firing across the house field straight over the steers' heads. Or into them. But he was hardly surprised when Anne-Hilarion turned instead to the slopes below the house.

"The lone tree, on the right, there." It was a bedraggled native pine. "That is a bird-nest, near the top?"

Amadeus had to squint to make out the bristling bulge in a branch crook. He could feel Pierre's shock. If not three hundred and fifty metres, it was certainly two-fifty. And a downhill shot at that.

"I think, a bird-nest, yes, m'sieu. Probably one of the native kites."

"Empty now?"

Amadeus just managed to answer gravely, "I would think so, m'sieu." *Let Pierre, he prayed, not laugh at a man who worries about bird-eggs before he shoots.*

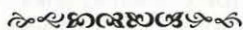
Anne-Hilarion's blue eyes glanced sidelong up at him, once. "I would not slaughter even a nestling, m'sieu," he said, very softly, "just for show."

Amadeus said, "Just so, m'sieu," and tried to keep his voice blank. A vassal may respect an aristo. He is most definitely not expected to discover liking as well.

Knowing muskets, the boys had already moved out to the rifle's left, lockless side. Suzanne followed with Louis-Paul, and Amadeus shepherded the tardy Modestine after them.

Anne-Hilarion checked his weapon's flint. Glanced once downhill. Drew the hammer to full cock, slid one hand fluidly up the barrel against the barn-door's side, leant into the sights and fired.

A fountain of sticks shot up in the pine branches, vanishing before the flat crack of the report died away among the mountainsides.



The fourth shot struck chips off a small boulder three hundred and eighty paced-out metres away. When the fifth took out a black Earth-hawk almost two hundred metres overhead, it silenced even Pierre's subterranean mutters of, "Coincidence."

Amadeus was already enslaved by the miraculous speed of the reload, swab the barrel with one ramrod end, tip in a charge from the powderhorn with accuracy itself miraculous, a "patch" of greasy cloth drawn from the flat ornamented box on the rifle-stock, a ball pressed atop it with a thumb and rodded home, priming pan wiped for another pinch of powder, hammer back to full cock ... and the cool, calm voice asking, "Another target, m'sieu?"

When Suzanne actually clapped at the fall of the hawk, a scourge of her hatching-coops, Anne-Hilarion bowed and let the rifle butt slide down onto his boot. But Amadeus' prepared compliments were lost in Modestine's cry of, "Oh, if only I could shoot like that!"

Pierre's resentment burst. "Bird-brain! Girls can't shoot at all!"

"I could! If someone taught me, I could! And *you* can't hit—!"

"Modestine!" Amadeus produced a glare that for once sliced squabbles at the butt.

But Anne-Hilarion was looking from Modestine, scarlet, shamed, still seething, to Pierre's sullenly triumphant protruding lip, to Suzanne beyond.

Whose face, Amadeus noted with near alarm, said nothing at all.

"It's true," Anne-Hilarion remarked to the distant valley-edge, "that aristo women do not shoot."

"Girls can't shoot!" Pierre burst out before Amadeus could curb him. "They're scared of the bang!"

"And with reason." Anne-Hilarion looked amused. "Or why did you stand away from the lock?"

As Pierre muttered in his non-existent beard Anne-Hilarion's eyes turned to Suzanne.

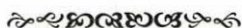
"But Madame, and Mam'zelle, do not inhabit a chateau, with a dozen guards — or at least, gamekeepers" — an almost comic wry expression — "between them and ... mischance." His eyes came, level, expressionless, to Amadeus. "What if another bull-killer came to La Vanoise? Perhaps in the daytime? Perhaps, for some reason, with none of the men here?"

A steer called its mate somewhere in the field. The barn-wall ticked in the warming sun. Amadeus looked helplessly at Suzanne, trying to say with his eyes, *Forgive me. I know your own father taught you to shoot. I know we have only muskets. But I should have remembered, have expected, have respected you enough, to let you use one here.*

*To forget aristo affectations and let one of us teach Modestine.*

Suzanne's eyes met his, a long, steady stare.

"Mon père," she said, as to her house-head, in full unlikely formality, "might one of the muskets be brought?"



They used Amadeus' gun, the most accurate of the three at La Vanoise. With a piece of hardwood replacing the flint, Modestine practiced how to heft, aim, and pull the trigger while keeping a proposed target somewhere in the sights. Flint replaced, gun primed, she had fired twice, and heroically managed not to flinch at the priming flash, before Suzanne, in a tone not to be gainsaid, announced the noon meal.

Also intending not to be gainsaid, immediately afterward Amadeus dispatched Jean and Louis-Paul to dig potatoes and Pierre to work on the abandoned rail, pointed Modestine firmly kitchenward, and took his guest to walk La Vanoise's bounds.



But as they tramped down the back hill toward the end of the far field, he found himself impelled to say, "The customs of New Ceres must seem ... odd, perhaps."

Looking straight ahead, Anne-Hilarion answered, "As the proverb says, m'sieu: *Autre pays, autre moeurs*."

Native crows flew up from the outer wall. They perched, black, glossy and screeching like stuck doors, in the scrabble of mixed offworld and native timber along the creek beyond.

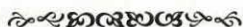
"New Ceres customs," Anne-Hilarion scanned the timber in one smooth sweep, "let me use this one," he shifted the rifle under his arm, "for more than tricks and target-display. As she should be used."

Amadeus bit his tongue on, *Are those how you live, offworld?*

"I will admit," Anne-Hilarion went on in a moment, "I doubt I would come here, without those doses guests may use, against the allergies. The 'plague'. And it seems foolish to keep such medicine from women, particularly. For births, for children's disease..."

The child Suzanne lost at birth. Amadeus found he had flinched toward the wall. "I should have taught Modestine myself," he was saying hurriedly. Too loudly. "As you say, we are not aristos. Up here, there is need to break the ... the customs, if not the rules. And no-one to complain."

Anne-Hilarion traced the creek's curve, round the foot of La Vanoise's knoll and away down valley. Then he glanced up and said softly, "You are a good man, M'sieu Lebrun."



*How I let that become permission for Modestine's second lesson today, Amadeus cursed himself, I truly do not know.* But when the shots stopped, he did not expect to find his daughter and his guest cleaning weapons on the front bench, oblivious to Pierre's livid scowl, chatting and even laughing with mutual animation.

Discussing, Amadeus found with utter amazement, fashions in Prosperine.

"Suzanne," he spluttered, all but scurrying into the kitchen, "why are they out — why have you not brought Modestine — what are you *doing*?"

His wife turned from her half-rolled pastry, and her smooth face, darker than his own, slid into a wickedly cryptic smile. "Be easy, Amadeus," she said. "Modestine will take no harm."

Against that smile Amadeus knew better than to dispute. He muttered a demand to the Virgin and went to act for himself.

But the moment he appeared Anne-Hilarion rose, decisively, if not with guilty alacrity. "Pardon me, mam'zelle." He bowed briefly. "M'sieu, tonight? There are arrangements I would wish."



"If Madame Suzanne is right, your bull-killer will be peckish now." Anne-Hilarion surveyed the barn-yard and house pasture like a general on the field. "The food here was easy, and plentiful. M'sieu, will all those cattle fit in this barn? Only for the night," he went on as Amadeus gulped. "Or at a pinch, in the yard?"

"No. No." Amadeus collected his wits. "We do not usually stall beasts, but we can clear space. There will be room. There are only fifteen, after all."

Anne-Hilarion's eyes dwelt a moment on his face. "Good," he said. "But there need only be room for fourteen."

"Bait? The pen? Oh! The rails are almost finished, yes, it would hold a beast. But..."

Anne-Hilarion grimaced. "The Comte de Beligny did give me authority to use what resources I should need. 'So you dispatch this voleur, anything!'" Amadeus could hear him spluttering it, a flush on the broad St. Vierge face, a spark in the irascible blue Irish eyes. "And with luck," Anne-Hilarion went on, when Amadeus hesitated, "and a reasonable shot — the beast will survive."

Amadeus thought of the hawk, body-shot two hundred metres overhead. Remembered he had expected to slaughter a beast himself for a posse of lords, and found a nod. "If you will choose your beast, m'sieu?"

He was gratified but not surprised when it proved the smallest and worst-doer of the group. He was a good deal more surprised when Anne-Hilarion came quietly into the barn to help heave work gear and junk around, to improvise a pen and try to cushion it against the panic to be expected the instant the steers smelt the predator. They had rushed the last time. They would not mistake the scent again.

Nor did any of them doubt, Amadeus realized, as the sun sank and Suzanne summoned them to a quick cold supper, that the predator would come.



Amadeus struggled to shift silently from one to the other ham. There could never have been so many knots and nailheads in any known floor, nor such a draft between planks, straight up his immobilized spine. His ears ached with tension. His eyes ached with staring out the loft door's shadowy rectangle, into luminous moonlit sky, past the silhouette of Anne-Hilarion's shoulder to the infuriatingly unaltered skyline of Mont Isère. *Sainte Vierge, it must be hours past midnight. Is this creature going to come at all?*

*Does that man never need to move?*

Cattle snuffled and shuffled below them, puzzled but content after a rack-load of unaccustomed hay. In the pen, he could feel the anxiety, the agitation of the isolated beast. Upset already at solitude, made worse by the persistent reek of death and bovine blood, it shuffled too, and pressed the rails, and had called out. But only once.

*However long domesticated, he thought, cattle know the grass-eaters' rules. Do not attract attention, if you are where that attention can be fleshed.*

*At least I, his thoughts ran on, am not alone. I have m'sieu here, Pierre inside the barn door. Jean at the front door with the third musket, Suzanne on watch inside.*

"We may bait the creature," Anne-Hilarion had remarked with chilling coolness, "but we do not know its habits. Next time it may choose differently." And Amadeus, blood creeping at the thought of it scaling the stockade, stalking his wife, his daughter, had fervently agreed.

He saw Anne-Hilarion's shoulder stiffen a fraction of a second before the cannies' muffled clamour inside the house sounded the general alarm.

The cattle in the barn snorted and clattered though Amadeus knew they lacked room to wreck the pen. He heard the bait-steer's panicked snort and thud into the rails above everything else, and desperately wanted to see for himself.

Anne-Hilarion came smoothly up to his knees with his left hand against the door-jamb and the rifle-barrel over it. *Of course, Amadeus' thoughts ran madly, it heard the cannies before and no harm came of them. It will not be deterred now.*

Anne-Hilarion's head dipped to the sights. At the last moment Amadeus scrambled forward over his knees and crouched with head almost to the floor so he could see out too.

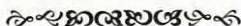
The steer was battering itself into the end of the pen, still too terrified to bellow. Atop the rails, like a clot of darkness



in the moonlight, balanced a squat, muscled shape. *Sacred Virgin*, was Amadeus' first appalled thought, *it's as big as the steer!*

The feet were close together, the back humped. A smaller clot marked the head. The tail swung out behind, long and visible as a rudder or a scorpion sting. As the back humped higher and in the darkness muscle gathered, Anne-Hilarion fired.

Lock and muzzle flares blazed and the crack rattled mountainsides. From outside came a short, strangled screech. A second later, through the reverberations, a bawl from the over-threatened steer and then a heavy echoless thud.



"Mother of God, look at those jaws!"

"It weighs like a load of lead!"

In crisis' wake, Jean and Pierre gabbled profanely and profusely while Suzanne upheld the lantern as they stretched out the corpse. Amadeus eyed the broad, deep head, the enormous front incisors, the heavy throat muscles, and thought, *No wonder it had no trouble with the bull.*

"And the tail — it's stiff — like a board, like a—!"

"Rudder," Amadeus said. Something was tickling in his mind, a memory of legends, of some strange animal on Earth.

"Rudder?" Pierre gaped.

"To balance it." Amadeus re-saw that glimpse atop the rails.

"Arms like a wrestler." Jean was pulling a foreleg out, cautious even yet. "And — Holy Mother, it has thumbs!"

"Thumbs?" Even Suzanne bent close.

"See, the claw here — it's long as a spike, it must draw back in, but the whole pad will turn. It could grip things like a man..."

Pierre recoiled. Amadeus tried not to follow suit. He stared down the sinewy, heavy-shouldered length, creamy-dappled below, muted-dusk brown above. A little blood had seeped from the hole in the forehead, but the jaws, open in death, still spoke their living threat. *Bigger than the steer we risked, heavy as the bull himself, toothed and clawed like an Earth lion. And able to grasp like a man?*

Jean had retreated but not recoiled. He was hauling the tail out, bent on further information. "Is it a male or...?"

He stopped. Suzanne brought the lantern. No, it was not a male. And below the cloaca...

"That is a marsupial," Anne-Hilarion might know more than they, but he sounded equally stunned. "A marsupial female. It has a pouch."

"A p—!"

Anne-Hilarion cut Pierre's incipient bawdry off mid-word.

"For holding young."

There was a sudden crevasse of silence in which the cannies' muffled protests, the cattle sounds, came louder than drums. Into it Anne-Hilarion bent, rifle still in the crook of an elbow, and very gently drew back the skinfold's rim.

Something wriggled, indistinct and shapeless in the lantern-glow, pinkish as the furless interior of the pouch, not yet as long as a man's thumb. Then Anne-Hilarion let go.

He straightened up and said very quietly, "And it — she — was carrying a child."

The lantern jerked. In Amadeus' head, ancient story and present reality met with an almost audible click.

"Kong-guro," he said. "Earth animal. Marsupial. Females carried young in a pouch instead of a womb. They had long, strong tails, they could sit up on their hind-legs, the tail balanced them when they hopped."

He did not hear Pierre's attempted witticism on a hopping bull-killer. In his mind the bull lay, butchered by those incisors, a huge shape squatted beside it, ripping, tearing with its fist of foreclaws, balanced on its rudder of a tail...

Suzanne said to Anne-Hilarion, "Might the — child — live?"

Anne-Hilarion looked at her across the lantern and slowly shook his head.

"Too young."

The stare they exchanged then Amadeus would have given an eye-tooth to understand. But after a moment Suzanne looked back to the corpse. Then she took the lantern left-handed, and with her right hand crossed herself.

Pierre and Jean straightened, struck equally dumb. Anne-Hilarion's face changed. As he went to speak the bait-steer suddenly hurled itself into the farther rails and from behind them came a deep, singing growl.

The lantern beam swung like a spaceport searchlight. White flashed dimly, straight and long. Above it green eyes lit and glared, a steer's height off the ground.

The flash of terror fired Amadeus' muscles on sight. The musket flew to his shoulder and his finger yanked the trigger. The blast of sound and flame drowned in a feral basso roar.

The flat crack of the rifle overlapped it. Brief human shrieks as Pierre and Jean tried to plunge up and grab their muskets while Suzanne swung the lantern like a light-blade — then Anne-Hilarion bawled in both their faces, "*The pen!*" He gave Amadeus a shove that almost threw him in Suzanne's arms, and ran.

Out into the yard, diagonally between them and the danger, shouting, waving arms and rifle like the veriest fool overcome by fear. Not even pausing to shoot.

Suzanne's shoulder almost took Amadeus' breath out. She bawled in turn, "*The pen!*" and grabbed Pierre's closest ear.

*The pen, in with the steer, a bigger group, a chance of safety if the predator did reject the running, shouting target, running with a gun unloaded, oh, Holy Virgin, how can I leave him, how can I leave my family, I have to reload, we at least have two loaded muskets... He told us, Go!*

With something between a sob and a scream Amadeus shoved Suzanne and Pierre bodily to the rails.

They blundered and fell and dragged each other inside. The steer crashed into the far corner, Pierre and Jean scrabbled upright, Amadeus just grabbed Pierre's barrel in time. "Not yet, idiot! You're firing straight at him!" Suzanne swung the lantern out to the yard wall. It flashed briefly on the rails of the open gate. Over dark ground beyond. Darkness coalesced there, bounding, Amadeus could almost see the balancing, trailing tail ... Darkness far slower than he dreaded, he had expected to see Anne-Hilarion already overtaken, brought down, mangled, a heroic sacrifice only fit to be revenged.



"But no, madame. Not so hard ... a shot." Anne-Hilarion was still panting. "So big. So ... direct." Head-on, Amadeus estimated, staring down at the prostrate heap. Right between the eyes. "It would have been ... difficult ... to miss."

Suzanne's silence answered for them, as she raised the lantern for Jean to find the discarded coat. Not difficult? To shoot straight and deadly, in haste and danger, with only the moon for light?

"The hard part," Anne-Hilarion shoved his free arm in a sleeve, "was to re-load ... and run."

"Nobody." Pierre was just audible. "Nobody can do that—"

"To the contrary ... m'sieu." He had his manners still, if not his breath. "It was done ... on Earth. By American woodsmen. The ones who ... used this rifle ... best."

He settled the coat around him. Already his hands were moving, automatically, as they had before he left the barn door, as they must have running in the half-light, swab, rod, powder, patch, ball, priming pan. Hammer at half-cock.

"It took two years to master. But my grandmother," he almost had his breath now, "let me begin young."

Behind them the cannies were still in uproar, though the cattle must have stilled. Around them the moon stared into tricky darkness, on the sheen of grass, the sprawled blot at their feet. A smell, now, Amadeus discovered, as he had not noticed with the first. Gamey, ammoniac, a mixture of fresh carnivore dung and ancient urine, and a deep, stranger stink of unknown beast.

Suzanne moved abruptly, and said, "This is a male."

Amadeus gaped a moment, before his own brain began processing. *Beast smell, yes, carnivore smell. Aged smell...* He remembered the tang of their past house-felis, just before it died.

He heard his voice say, sounding very small in the silence, "And old."

Pierre and Jean were gaping. Anne-Hilarion looked between them to his kill.

"And slow," he said, too quietly. "Too old, perhaps, to hunt."

The cannies' noise subsided. Through it now came snatches of Modestine's high, over-emphatic voice. Bidden stay in the house with Louis-Paul at all costs, she would be frantic to know what had happened. *She'll be out here*, Amadeus was thinking, *any second now, orders, lack of a musket, or not*. But around them, in the moonlight and the circle of beast smell, it still seemed deadly quiet.



Then Suzanne said softly, "But not too old to breed."

"No." Anne-Hilarion's head was still bent. He had let the rifle down once more to rest its stock against his boot. For a moment he might have been a stylized, mourning rifleman from a cenotaph.

"He could breed. Probably, she would hunt."

*Like Earth lions*, Amadeus thought, other ancient stories coming back. *But this had not been a pride, this had only been...*

"A breeding pair," he said aloud.

Anne-Hilarion lifted his head, and his face in the lantern-light said he understood.

"Perhaps," he answered, "the very last."

Pierre was fidgeting, uncomfortable with riddles as with emotion he did not understand. "Why the last," he began and Anne-Hilarion cut him uncharacteristically short.

"Because the male was old, and the female young. If there were others, he could not have kept her. She would have taken a mate her age."

He turned to survey the entire corpse. "Lucky," he said without expression, "that we both wounded him, m'sieu. Otherwise he would have caught me, at the last. Lucky ... for all of us."

Pierre grunted. But Suzanne's face in the lantern-glow was somber as Anne-Hilarion's.

"And then," she said softly, "he would have been alone."

Bereft of a mate. Perhaps forever. Doomed to slow death from wounds, or slower starvation. Perhaps the very last of his kind. Amadeus swallowed, feeling grief and pity where he had never dreamed to do.

"Well, they're both dead," Pierre announced. "And good riddance, if we're to keep a beast up here. They already had the bull—!"

"And do you not ask why?" This time Anne-Hilarion actually sounded fierce. "Does it not occur to you, these were native creatures? And doubtless they had native prey, before we came? Did they ask you to change their planet? To take over their world? To leave them nothing else?"

Shaken by the vehemence if nothing else, Pierre gaped.

Anne-Hilarion produced an audible snort. "This is just what our ancestors did, on Earth. White, brown or," his eye met Amadeus' without apology, "black. We all expected to breed as we liked, push others aside, kill them if they tried to take their lands, their hunting runs, their life-needs back. Humans or beasts. Not merely small beasts. Lions, elephants,

crocodiles. Snakes. How dare they assume they could compete with us?"

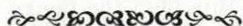
Jean's mouth was open too. Even Suzanne looked taken aback. It was Pierre who, inevitably, had to mutter, "You killed the hawk—!"

"An *Earth*-bird, did Madame not say? Of a tribe who plague your hens?"

When Pierre could only glower, Anne-Hilarion turned away.

"I have solved your 'problem'," the inflection made Amadeus wince, "because that was what I agreed. But," his eyes dropped to the corpse, "what else I may have done, I will remember the rest of my life."

He swung the rifle up under his arm and stalked away toward the house.



When they finally rose from a belated, wordless breakfast, Amadeus tracked Anne-Hilarion back up to the loft, and was unsurprised to find his guest adding meticulously folded clothes to a brimming saddlebag.

"M'sieu?"

Anne-Hilarion glanced up. Amadeus wavered, then plunged to his own essential point.

"You did save *our* lives."

The surprisingly small, tense hands relaxed. Just audibly, Anne-Hilarion sighed.

"M'sieu..." Another pause, then a shadow of the original slight smile.

"I suppose, at the crux — we all choose our own kind."

"Or our own colour," Amadeus supplemented ruefully. "Our own nation. Our own blood." *Our own family*, he added to himself. *As I chose. My family, over theirs.*

Anne-Hilarion inclined his head. The silence said the rest. *And we will always do so, however well we know it, however much we may regret.*

"But at least," Anne-Hilarion said, "we can know — we can acknowledge — what we do."

*Small comfort*, the tone added. Amadeus nodded, letting the silence answer for him: *Yes.*

When the moment reached its rightful end he said softly, "My family hoped you would stay a little. Suzanne wishes to cook her Boeuf en Daube. It is hardly justified, except for a guest. And," he took in a little breath, "we hoped you might, of your kindness — teach a little more to Modestine."

Anne-Hilarion's hands twitched. He looked down, and up, and Amadeus read the irony, the self-knowledge in the fleeting smile. *You offer me kindness, honour, courtesy it would be discourtesy to reject. And ask me to pass my skill to one who will get it nowhere else. The skill that made me. The skill that I, this moment, most bitterly regret.*

"M'sieu..." Then he inclined his head again, less courtesy than surrender. "I will be honoured," he said.



The Boeuf en Daube was sublime. Pierre managed to swallow his bile, and in two days of sunlight Modestine progressed from a primed to a lightly loaded musket to a full charge that actually hit a target. But then the peaks dulled and swathed themselves, and Amadeus said reluctantly, "M'sieu, I think a spring storm is building up."

Anne-Hilarion said, "Snow?" At Amadeus' nod he reached for his rifle, and Amadeus said, "Pierre will saddle your horse."

The wind was rising when Jean led the chestnut into the palisade. The saddlebags were swung on, the rifle scabbarded. Already muffled in his weather-coat, Anne-Hilarion turned to make his farewells.

Suzanne first: a deep curtsy from her, a leg from him, this time with hat swept before him like an aristo. They exchanged another of those enigmatic looks. Then Suzanne said, "A fair journey ... m'sieu."

Amadeus had no time to wonder at Anne-Hilarion's odd little half-smile. Modestine had already broken precipitately past to grasp both the guest's hands. "Oh, m'sieu, how can I thank you? I will practise and practise — and I will never forget!"

Amadeus wondered if anyone else could read the flicker in his guest's face. But then, to his amazement, Anne-Hilarion laughed aloud and gave Modestine a quick but definite hug. "Nor I, mam'zelle. And I hope you have word soon, of the fashions in Prosperine."

A formal bow, a pair of mumbles and a rote, "M'sieu," dismissed Pierre, with a smile added for Jean. Louis-Paul got the smile alone, but with Amadeus, Anne-Hilarion hesitated, then held out his hand.

"M'sieu Lebrun... You have been most kind."

Amadeus found he had no wish to hesitate. He clamped the hand in his, sunbrown but still shades lighter than his own. "Whatever else you take away, m'sieu, you will have our gratitude. Our remembrance. Always."

This time Anne-Hilarion smiled almost openly. And mumbled awkwardly as if he were Pierre, "M'sieu..."

Then he swung astride. Up valley, the clouds were steel-grey and pustulent blue, with a white underskirt of rain. Suzanne said, "Ride carefully, m'sieu." The wind produced its first scream round a house-corner, and suddenly Modestine caught the saddle-pommel. "M'sieu, one last thing! May we know your name? Your family name?"

Amadeus groaned silently and moved to catch her, but Anne-Hilarion half-lifted a hand.

"I do not think you could pronounce it, mam'zelle. It is old, known on Earth. One of my ancestors was famous there. But in French — it might mean something like 'Chénier'."

Amadeus firmly detached Modestine, and Anne-Hilarion gathered his reins. As the liver-chestnut trotted sedately away Modestine was babbling into the gale.

"Chénier, what could that be, Papa, Maman? The oak-person? The oak-man? Surely that could not be right?"

Suzanne glanced downhill, and produced what Amadeus called her oracle smile. "More to that young man," she said, "than meets the eye."

Through Modestine's explosion Amadeus dredged up memories from the vassals' school at Millefleur. "Most probably it's English, the real name. In English, Chénier would be something like ... Oak-le. Oak-ly." The syllables echoed against some tag of memory. "Oakley, perhaps?"

He turned to catch the door before it blew out of its frame. Behind him the liver-chestnut rounded the first curve of valley, and went at a canter out of sight.